Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 36: Disabled Entrepreneurs

Guests: Tinu Abayomi-Paul and Mary, Hannah, and Emma Layden

Host: Alice Wong

Transcript by Cheryl Green

For more information: https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/podcast

Introduction

[radio static and hip-hop]

LATEEF MCLEOD: This is the Disability Visibility Podcast with your host, Alice Wong.

ALICE WONG: Hello, you lovely humans! Welcome to the Disability Visibility Podcast, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. I'm your host Alice Wong.

Life as a disabled person is a constant hustle. Employment and economic self-sufficiency can be a real challenge, and today I'm talking with some disabled entrepreneurs. First, I chat with three sisters, Mary, Hannah, and Emma Layden, about their business, love bili nyc, an apparel company that promotes disability awareness and empowerment. Next, I talk with Tinu Abayomi-Paul, who runs a business called Leveraged Promotion and blogs various tips and resources for disabled entrepreneurs. Mary, Hannah, Emma, and Tinu all offer a lot of great practical advice if you are considering starting something yourself or just curious. Are you ready? Away we go!

[electronic beeping]

ELECTRONIC VOICE: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

Introduction to Layden sisters interview

ALICE: OK! So, Mary Francis, Hannah, and Emma, thank you so much for being on my podcast today.

ALL THREE AT ONCE: Yeah, thank you having us. Of course. This is awesome. We're so excited.

ALICE: How about each one of you just introduce yourselves briefly? How about we start with Mary Francis, Hannah, and then Emma, if that's OK?

MARY LAYDEN: Sure. So, my name is Mary Francis, and I'm one of the co-founders of love bili nyc, which is a apparel company based in New York that promotes disability awareness and empowerment through our designs. And I also work for a non-profit here in New York called A Leg to Stand On, which provides free prosthetic care to children in developing countries.

HANNAH LAYDEN: And I'm Hannah, and I'm also a co-founder of love bili. And I'm also a visual artist, and I live and work in New York City.

EMMA LAYDEN: I'm Emma. I'm not a co-founder of love bili.

MARY FRANCIS and HANNAH: [laugh]

EMMA: But I run their social media, and I'm just involved in general because I live with these two. I'm a writer. Right now, I'm a freelance writer in the City. I graduated from NYU last May, oh gosh, in a year. And I mostly write comedy, and a lot of my writing deals with disability and difference and trying to bring humor to that because I think there is a lot of humor in what it's been like for me, at least, to grow up with a disability. And yeah!

ALICE: There really is a lot of humor. There's a lot of culture.

[bouncy music interlude]

And I feel like that also comes up with apparel too because having symbols, having objects, merchandise—whatever you wanna call it—that reflects our lives really says a lot about who we are and what we stand for.

The mission and history of love bili nyc and where the company's name came from

MARY: Well, and that was one of the reasons why we wanted to create it, is that our mission statement states that we take devices or images that are often seen or associated with weakness and sort of celebrate them. 'Cause we do obviously view them in a positive way 'cause they've been a part of our lives, but I think people who are able-bodied or who don't know that much about disability associate them in a negative way and see them as a weakness. So, that's sort of why we wanted to include those in the design.

HANNAH: Yeah.

EMMA: Mmhmm.

ALICE: And this is for Mary Francis and Hannah: first, I'm curious about where did the name love bili nyc come from? And also, kinda what sparked the idea for this business?

MARY: This is Mary. I think what sparked the idea, Hannah and I were looking to do something together. 'Cause we were both working, but we had some free time. We've always wanted to do some sort of business together, and Hannah has experience in screen printing. And then I have experience from my schooling—I studied Social Work in undergrad—working with people with disabilities and studying it. And so, I think we thought of the fashion because it's sort of something that everyone can relate to, and pretty much everyone has an interest one way or another in fashion. And it's something that everyone can relate to. And so, we thought that would be the good idea, and then that's when Hannah came up with the great designs. And so, we thought, why not start with t-shirts and tote bags, which we're still at, but who knows if it grows one day into something else.

HANNAH: Yeah.

ALICE: Well, everyone needs a tote bag, right?

[playful music interlude]

ALICE: So, how long has love bili nyc been in business, and is there a meaning behind the name?

HANNAH: Oh, the name. Yeah. This is Hannah. We've been up two years?

MARY: Yeah. This is Mary. I think February of 2015 we came up with it, or ’16 we came up with the idea.

HANNAH: Oh yeah, and then it got rolling.

MARY: We launched that summer.

HANNAH: So, it’s love bili nyc, with two hearts in between. And the bili is b-i-l-i, and it’s the bili instead of “disability.”

ALICE: Yeah! Interesting.

Social media’s role in building the business

ALICE: And thinking of you, Emma, because you do handle the social media for this company. How important is the usage of social media to build the business, and what have you learned in terms of lessons about marketing and engagement and outreach to the disability and kind of the spoonie community?

EMMA: Oh, so much. I think social media, it’s kind of a double-edged sword. It’s such a great thing, and it’s such a scary thing because you can get so addicted to it, and there’s so much on it that it misrepresents the way the world works. But I like that love bili, we’re using it in a very honest way. We’re fully representing what our life is like and what the lives of people who wear our shirts are like.

One big thing we do is Follow Friday, which we featured you on last week! So, we show a disability activist in the community. And so, just that alone has been really awesome for me. There’s such a community on Instagram specifically of people with disabilities.

MARY: And Twitter.

EMMA: And Twitter too, meeting each other, and it’s so amazing to see. Specifically, what I really like too is our social media has a point of view. We’re not afraid to, on the day of the election, we said what we thought in all of the many ways that the world has kind of mistreated people with disabilities lately and within our country right now. We’ve spoken out, and I think that’s great because we have a unique voice, and we wanna use that. And so, whenever we’ve seen things happening in the world that we don’t agree with and that we feel disheartened by, I think it’s nice to just send some positivity out there and reinforce our message of love and say, “This is wrong, but there is still love in our designs and our point of view. And our commitment to this process proves how much love there is still left.”

[bouncy music interlude]

The challenges of a new small business

ALICE: Any kind of small business is always kind of, it’s a hustle. It’s a real struggle. I’m really curious to hear about the challenges that you’ve all been through as a company that’s been around for like about 2 ½ years or 3 years. Tell me about the growing pains and kinda the lessons you’ve learned.

HANNAH: I think—this is Hannah—one of the challenges is just getting the word out there. That’s, I think, been the biggest in what we’re trying to work on, you know.

EMMA: Mmhmm.

MARY: And this is Mary. I think also part of it is we, all three of us, are working for the most part full-time. So, I think if we had more time to focus all of our energy on it, I think that would be idea. And so, right now, it's sort of, I don't know, side business, but we spend a lot—

EMMA: Side hustle.

MARY: Yeah. We spend a lot of time on it, as if it were full-time. But I think that's part of the reason why we're still getting it off the ground.

EMMA: This is Emma—I think because we're all doing other things in other jobs and in other communities, I think that actually has been helpful. Like, last year, just being at NYU during two years of the life of bili was great because I would see people every day, different people every single day, in different classes, every single day. And if I was wearing a bili shirt, that's a great way to get the word out. So, while this business isn't the #1 job of Mary or Hannah or I, us having other jobs has been helpful because having access to new eyes every day in all the places that we go, all the places that our life takes us has been really helpful.

Disabled people's innate skills and strengths make them excellent business people

ALICE: Yeah. And I do believe that people with disabilities are some of the most creative and savvy people on earth.

ALL THREE: Yeah. Mmhmm.

ALICE: And because of the world that we live in, in a lotta ways, that makes us excellent business people, excellent executives. I mean, what do you think, thinking about your own upbringing and growing up, what are some of the innate skills that all three of you have that really bring into making a business a strength?

HANNAH: This is Hannah. I think one strength we do have and a positive strength is we're all very patient. And I think that's because we had to be because of growing up, our movement was limited. Or you kinda have to be, when you kind of grow up like that, you have to be patient. So, it's like with the business, it's a nice quality to have, I think.

EMMA: This is Emma. And just gratitude. I think applying that to a business is just understanding states. Like, this is really important, but we've lived through so many important things. And just being confident in ourselves, knowing that we've been through so much, and we can. There's so much talk about kind of self-esteem and disability. I think I have so much more self-esteem because of my disability 'cause I know how much I—

HANNAH: Yeah, less insecurity.

EMMA: Yeah. I know how much I can do. I've done surgery on my back, like, I'll be fine. I can go to improv and not be nervous about it, and I can do this business with the girls and take pride in it because I should have a lot of pride.

MARY: This is Mary. I also think it's helped us become more hardworking. A lot of that's our parents and our older sister. We were all raised to be hardworking. But I think when you have a disability, it pushes you to work harder.

EMMA: Yeah, you have to work harder.

MARY: Not just physically, which we do, but also I guess even socially, right?

EMMA: Yeah.

MARY: Just trying to fight off people's stereotypes or perceptions, or people staring at you on the street is something I know I personally still deal with every day. So, I think you just work harder, and that obviously translates really well into business and everyday life, I think.

EMMA: Yeah.

HANNAH: I also don't care what people think, which I think is a good.

EMMA: It's a good starting point. I think also, this is a random thing to mention, but just in terms of skills you get. I would say our mom too, just having kids with disabilities, our mom is the most crafty person.

HANNAH: [laughs]

EMMA: 'Cause you said people with disabilities are so smart and have to do— Yeah, my mom could build a wheelchair desk out of anything. It's really helped in the business of just thinking outside of the box and dealing with a world that isn't accessible and making it accessible.

[plucky music interlude]

Working together as sisters

ALICE: So, what do you like best about working together as sisters?

MARY: This is Mary. It's really easy. We get along really well, and the four of us—including our older sister—we're very, very close. Probably spend too much time together. But I think we work really well together because we also have similar tastes. So, we don't really disagree on designs or anything, and if we do, we're able to tell each other like, "I don't really like that."

EMMA: Yeah, we can be honest, so no one's feelings are hurt.

MARY: Yeah, we can be honest. I don't think we've ever had a blow-out or anything. We just work really well together.

EMMA: No, not yet.

MARY: Yeah, not yet! Because we're so close. And I know sometimes not everyone would be able to work with their family, but I think with us. And I think the three of us all sharing the same condition has made us even closer because it's so unique.

EMMA: This is Emma. Yeah, and in general, our family is just so close, I think, because our parents and our older sister, Sarah, have taken care of us in such unique ways, that's made us such a close family. And I think also why the business works together is this is such a, it's a weird time in the world, and we have the exact same—I think, I mean Mary and Emma are probably nicer than me but—we have a pretty similar moral compass. And I think that's really important right now 'cause it's just nice to know that we all believe in the same things, and we all feel passionate about the same things. And we all wanna work to improve the way certain people are feeling, including us, on a daily basis. And so, I think that's really exciting, and it's really comforting. 'Cause I think you need that right now. You need reassurance that other people agree with you.

HANNAH: Yeah.

Final thoughts about being a disabled entrepreneur

ALICE: Mmhmm. Well, this is great. Are there any other final comments you wanna share about the experience of being a disabled entrepreneur or just anything about the experience of being a business owner?

HANNAH: This is Hannah. I would just say if you have an idea, and you realize you have strengths in one area, I would just, I would say go for it and find people that can people you. But even if it is risky, just start on a smaller scale.

EMMA: And this is Emma. Our business is not without difficulty. For Hannah, she's really good at screen printing, but it definitely takes a toll.

HANNAH: Yeah.

EMMA: This week, I think she was screen printing like 30 shirts, and she was so beat by the end of the day. And you know, we're lucky because we have help from our mom and our dad and our other sister who, if we have to get orders out, can drive us around and help us pack. So, that's also surrounding yourself with people who can get your idea off the ground. It's all about combining strength.

MARY FRANCIS and HANNAH: Mmhmm.

EMMA: So, if you have an idea, and you have this great plan to execute it, find the people who can help you do that.

ALICE: How about you, Mary? Do you have any advice?

MARY: I think, like Hannah said, just go for it. I think when we started, we were just sitting together, talking, and it seemed sort of not far-fetched, but we were talking about it. And then it took a lot of work, but it, I don't know, came together so nicely, and we've had such a—even though we're still trying to grow—we've had such a good response, more than I expected. And so, I think that was so rewarding.

ALICE: I like that. I think that's the way that things that are really approachable are really a great way to share messages.

Wrap-up to the Layden sisters interview

ALICE: Well, thank you all so much for talking with me this morning.

ALL AT ONCE: Thank you so much. Thank you for having us. Thank you. This was wonderful. We're such big admirers of your work. Yeah. It was nice to talk to you.

MARY: So, this was really cool.

HANNAH: Yes.

[energetic music interlude]

Introduction to Tinu Abayomi-Paul's interview

ALICE: So, Tinu, thank you so much for being on my podcast today!

TINU ABAYOMI-PAUL: Thank you for having me.

ALICE: And Tinu, why don't you introduce yourself and just tell us a little bit about what you do and where you are and just anything you'd like to share.

TINU: OK. I'm gonna try to make this short because a lot of things have happened to me the last three years that make me kind of not what I was and what people generally identify me as. My name, of course, is Tinu Abayomi-Paul. Don't ever worry about trying to say my last name. Just call me Tinu. [chuckles] And I am a disabled entrepreneur. I have been disabled since 1993 and have accepted it since 2000, I think, or maybe 2009. I had a long journey with trying to accept my invisible disabilities. And I started out in marketing. I was kind of a Google go-to girl for small- and medium-sized businesses. I also work for big publications. A couple years ago, I was diagnosed with cancer. So, on top of invisible disabilities, it causes this rift in my life. So, I'm kind of on a comeback trail, and what I've decided to do is move over a little bit outside the area of marketing into small business, but to direct most of what I'm doing to disabled entrepreneurs. I haven't really finished running the numbers on it, so I don't know if it's gonna be something where, you know, I don't know how lucrative that is. But that's where my heart is right now.

I also want to help people who have issues with being both disabled and having cancer. So, I'm writing a book about that. So, my life is in flux right now, but at the heart of things, I'm a writer and an activist.

[chill music interlude]

ALICE: That's wonderful. And speaking of activism, that's how I discovered you is really through Twitter and really appreciating your voice and your activism on Twitter. And I think I remember you tweeting about you being a business owner, and I wanted to do an episode all about entrepreneurs. I thought oh, this is perfect!

TINU: Yeah. Thank you for the compliment, first of all.

Getting started as a disabled entrepreneur

TINU: And it's so great that the timing of all of this because this is, we're into about a year since I cemented my feet and said, I'm gonna talk to disabled entrepreneurs. And what I used to do is kind of incorporate the fact that I was disabled into my marketing to kinda say if, you know, I have a few more obstacles than you small business owner. So, if I can do this, anybody else who has different kind of obstacles can do this too. But what became the stumbling point was I ended up talking to mostly people who were not like me.

And there's a big problem in, I think, our community where first of all, most of us now know that if you become disabled or you were born disabled, it can be difficult to get the kind of resources that we think are there for disabled people from local, state, or federal government. And even if we get those resources, then we're supposed to live our lives a certain way that don't really allow us to receive or generate the kind of income that we would, a person would like to have. And I think one of the loopholes around that—legal loopholes around that—is entrepreneurism.

The problem that we have, though, is that a lot of things that are made to say, OK, here's how to be an entrepreneur are not for us. So, somebody might say, "Go into writing. Why don't you write some stuff?" And I actually said this to my best friend when she had cancer before me, and she just kinda sighed. And it wasn't until I had cancer and I had the corresponding fatigue and I had the corresponding energy and pain issues that I realized OK, this is what she's talking

about. Writers have deadlines. Writers have to be able to write! Writers have to be awake to write. So, we have those issues where there's the supposed way that we could live, and then there's really not a trail or a path for us to get on that particular avenue.

ALICE: And I do think that outside of entrepreneurs, I think just what we think of as "regular work," employment, it's so inflexible.

TINU: It is!

Examples of how traditional work can be ableist, and disabled entrepreneurs innovate

ALICE: It really excludes all kinds of bodies, all kinds of people, all kinds of bodyminds. So, could you reflect a little bit on that in terms of especially for people who maybe don't really realize how ableist employment really is? What are some other examples that, before you started your own business, that the structure and organizational work really locks a lot of people out?

TINU: Well, I can talk about examples from my life first of all. The last time I worked was—for someone else full-time was—2002, and I have spinal degenerative disorder. I didn't have nerve damage or anything like that then, but I had to take several months off to do intensive physical therapy. And at the time, you only had the 12-week leave that the government gives you, and I tried to go back to work. I didn't realize, having considered myself abled before that even though I wasn't really, there's obstacles to getting to the building: like just trying to ride the subway in the morning, trying to drive your own car. There's obstacles to getting into the actual building. Once you get into the building, it's hard to move around. And then just getting around corners, just being able to actually physically work. Then there's fatigue, not being designed for the type of pain that we have or not being allowed to do the things that we need to do to alleviate that pain. There's so many different ways where the work world is not set up for us, not set up for the way that we'd like to get paid, not set up for the hours that we have to have. Some of us can't do 8:00 – 5:00. It's just not a thing. And I could go on and on, but it's like having a pocket universe inside earth where we can see everything, but we can't touch anything, and we can't participate. It's really an issue.

[mellow music interlude]

ALICE: Well, I do think that I know people with disabilities are like the most innovative and creative people because we learn to live without. And we're interdependent on one another.

TINU: People think that being a disabled entrepreneur, that that phrase means that something is taken away. I believe that something is added to because of what you said: the innovation. We have to be innovative, and it just so happens a lot of the innovations that we create for ourselves can be applied to other people. Learning to understand that we have strengths just like anybody else, but that they're not recognized a lot of the time. And also, to learn to see the creative strength that we have is, you know, that journey is what I think made me stick with being an entrepreneur and continuing on that path rather than trying to change over to something else that, to some other type of way of making money that I think would condescend to me. And being an entrepreneur, I can set my own rules, and I can decide who I work with and who's on my team. And it's much more liberating, as I'm sure it is for anyone entrepreneur.

ALICE: You mentioned about the flexibility and control that you have in being your own boss. So, what are the advantages of being an entrepreneur? What are some things that you personally love about being your own boss and having your own business?

TINU: The number one thing is flexibility, for me, because if I wake up, and I'm having a bad pain day, I can just go back to sleep. If I need to go to the doctor, I can go, come back, and then work or work beforehand. There have been times, and there are times when it's a little bit rocky, where I'm in a sustained pattern of feeling not my best, where I have longer flares where it does get a little tough because I can't do the things that I would need to do to flip over some money really fast. But that's with anything, and that's with any entrepreneur; however, the thing I learned to combat that is that I looked at my time and how I was spending it. And I realized that this 60-hour workaholic week contained like 35 hours of just putzing around that I thought was work and isn't really. So, I have now this 15 hours of solid work that I do early in the week, before anything else. And then the rest of the week, I do those other things.

[chill music interlude]

Common mistakes first-time entrepreneurs make

ALICE: So, what do you think are some of the common mistakes that most first-time entrepreneurs make?

TINU: I think it's one, waiting too long. I believe that as soon as you have your idea for what you wanna do, you should start trying to do it. And if you fail once, twice, four times, don't worry about. Just fail as fast as you can because I had like seven failed businesses before I did anything worthwhile. But now, I've had the same company for 20 years. So, once you get those failures out of the way, where you, OK, I tried to do this. That didn't work. I tried to do the other thing. That didn't work. Those failures aren't really failures. They're lessons; they're teaching you how not to do things. Even though somebody may have given you the impression that that's the way to go, learning for yourself that that's not for you is one of the most valuable things you can know.

Secondly, I think a lot of people quit their full-time job way too soon. I waited until I was making more money in a day than I was making in a month from the job that I was at. The first day I made like $2,000 in one day, I quit. What I didn't do was continue doing the thing that made me that money because I was scared. Which is, I think, is another big mistake is you get to this place of success, and things are starting to go so well, and you do something that was big and scary and great and went well. But then you're scared to do it again because it's unfamiliar. But all of this, a lot of this is gonna be unfamiliar because you haven't done it before. But if it's successful, keep doing the successful things.

The other two things: getting help. Like I can't stress enough. But the other thing is to manage your schedule so that you get the thing that directly makes you money done early during the day, and then do all of the other things. A lot of people chase all the new sales, but you can't build a business on new sales or new visitors from advertising. You need people to come back and repeat and repeat and repeat, you know. So, repeat business build businesses. One-off sales and one-off encounters really don't. So, kinda find out who your people are and get them, even if it's a small group of them. Like if you have 100 people, 200 people, if you find what they need, they can stay loyal to your forever.

Top three tips for new entrepreneurs to get started

ALICE: Well, thank you for sharing that. So, as we wrap up, I just wanna ask you one last question. And that's again, I think for maybe some of the listeners of this podcast who, they have an idea maybe for a business, but they might be intimidated or just not sure what to do first. So, where do you suggest people get started? If you name like the first three things for

somebody who wants to start their own business, what should they do? What are the first three things that you do?

TINU: OK. So, the first thing would be, I would say find a community of other early small-business owners or people who are already doing what you wanna do and start hanging out with those people. Because a lot of times, they have secrets or tips or information that can shorten your learning curve. Secondly, investigate your market. You might have an idea for a product or a service, and it really, really makes you happy. But if it doesn't make somebody else happy enough, they're not gonna buy it. The third thing is I would build relationships with people in similar but not competing industries, and you can cross-promote to each other's audiences.

Wrap-up to Tinu Abayomi-Paul's interview

ALICE: Wow. Tinu, thank you so much for being on my podcast today and for sharing so many great tips and just your story. I think this is gonna be incredibly of interest and really wonderful for so many people who are just interested and wanting to learn more about entrepreneurs. I think that disabled entrepreneurs have so much to offer, and most people don't even realize it. So, yeah, I truly appreciate you coming onto my podcast tonight.

TINU: Thank you for having me. It's been a great honor. I've admired you for such a long time.

ALICE: Oh, no, no, no!

TINU: That's right.

Wrap-up

[hip-hop]

♪ Pole dance, romance, hats off
Knees up, toes down, let's dance
Get as low as you would if you were my sweatpants
How far will they go…. ♪

ALICE: This podcast is a production of the Disability Visibility Project, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture. All episodes including text transcripts are available at DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/Podcast.

You can also find out more about Mary, Hannah, Emma, and Tinu's businesses on our website.

The audio producer for this episode is Geraldine Ah-Sue. Introduction by Lateef McLeod. Theme music by Wheelchair Sports Camp.

Subscribe to our podcast on iTunes, Stitcher, or Google Play. You can also support our podcast for $1 a month or more by going to our Patreon page at Patreon.com/DVP. That's p-a-t-r-e-o-n dot com, slash DVP.

Thanks for listening, and see you on the Internets! Byeeeee!

♪ Rock it to the blast off
Stop drop dance off ♪